

## MGWUSA REJECTS REGISTRATION

On Saturday 25th February this year the Municipal and General Workers Union of South Africa (MGWUSA) held its AGM. The crucial issue on the meeting's agenda was how the union would respond to the city council's refusal to negotiate with an unregistered union and the council's recent implementation of a closed shop agreement with a union called the Union of Johannesburg Municipal Workers.

These moves were seen by MGWUSA as an attempt to force the black workforce at the council to join a "tame" union against their choice.

To counter this offensive from the council the union's AGM considered the possibility of registration and affiliation to the industrial council - a surprising move given MGWUSA's consistent principled stand against registration and opposition to participation in the industrial council system. In the end the AGM, attended by approximately 1000 workers, decided against registration and for legal action in the industrial court as an alternative method of counteracting the council's attempts to weaken MGWUSA.

In this interview Gatsby Mazwi, the President of MGWUSA, explains the background to and reasons for the union's rejection of registration and participation in the industrial council.

SALB: Can you explain the background to the discussions about registration at your recent AGM?

GM: The basic thing was to look into the possibility of taking the council to the industrial court on the grounds of refusing to speak to us. The possibility of registration was raised as a possibility but strongly rejected by the membership. The meeting was a response to a letter from the chairman of the City Council's Staff Board, Mr J C de Villiers, which stated that registration

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together with membership of the industrial council was a prerequisite for negotiations and correspondence between us and the city council.

In the meantime the council has organised a closed shop agreement with a union that none of our members want to join and that forces workers to pay 60c per week in subscription fees to this union (Union of Johannesburg Municipal Workers). This seems a strange union. It's membership cards don't have the union's address on them and management sends out circulars advertising the union's meetings. Why does management try so hard to get workers to join the union? This is the very union that MGWUSA was formed in opposition to. In 1980 workers staged a mass walkout of this union's first meeting and on the steps outside immediately mandated Joe Mavi to form a union to really represent the workers.

SALB: So what was decided at the AGM?

GM: Workers are determined to do something about this. They took a decision to look into the possibility of industrial court action. It seems the council's refusal to talk to us might be an unfair labour practice. The workers also rejected being forced to join a union against their own choice.

We will see our lawyers this week to discuss these two issues - the council's refusal to negotiate and the closed shop.

SALB: Given your union's previous stand against registration why were you prepared to discuss this as a possibility?

GM: We were considering all channels of response to the council's letters refusing to talk to us. But workers were aware that de Villiers, the chairman of the Staff Board, was also secretary of the industrial council. They didn't believe he would be less intransigent towards us if we joined

the industrial council.

Our policy is always under the control of the members. We went to discuss our methods of struggle. We explained the advantages and disadvantages of registration. We weren't pleading for registration, but it had to be discussed as a possibility.

SALB: What advantages for the union do you see if the industrial court rules in your favour?

GM: It's not clear if a favourable ruling will give us more access to the workers in the council. The mobilisation of more membership is not our aim in going to the industrial court. What we want is to stop the council from forcing our members to join this other union. Our members are continuing to pay their membership fees to MGWUSA but two subscriptions are a strain on wages. The other union's fee is R2.40 a month - more than twice our fee of R1 per month.

SALB: In discussing these issues did you make a distinction between the formality of registration and the problems of participating in the industrial council - as some unions do?

GM: Workers were not confident in the law. They believe that the law is not for them, but against them. One of our biggest problems is assaults by white supervisors. We have tried to bring charges in many of these cases. But the Senior Public Prosecutor has always declined to prosecute. And in the few cases that came before the court the defendant had been given the benefit of the doubt by the court and set free. This reinforces workers doubts about the law.

We must also consider the uniqueness of local government. It's seldom that a single factory has an industrial council all of its own. Here the city council has its own industrial council. Other unions have more room to manoeuvre in industrial

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councils. Here even legal strikes are impossible in some departments because they are classified as essential services. The fact that the chairman of the council's staff board is the secretary of the industrial council is a symbol to workers of the control that the city council has over the industrial council.